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WORKSHOP REPORT: CANADIAN MEDIA COVERAGE OF THE AMERICAS

FOCAL

March 2, 2001 (Ottawa)

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WORKSHOP REPORT: CANADIAN MEDIA COVERAGE OF THE AMERICAS
March 2, 2001
Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada

The public workshop on Canadian media coverage of the Americas was organized by the Canadian Foundation for the Americas (FOCAL) and co-sponsored by Carleton University's School of Journalism and Communication. The meeting was made possible with the generous support of the Canadian Centre for Foreign Policy Development (CCFPD). The event was held less than two months prior to the Summit of the Americas in Quebec City, and thus presented a timely opportunity to bring together journalists, editors and producers from the Canadian and Latin American media, as well as policy analysts and academics specializing in Latin American affairs, to discuss past and present Canadian media coverage of the Americas, and to look ahead to key upcoming regional issues.

Nobina Robinson, Executive Director of FOCAL, introduced the primary goals of the workshop: to further interest in the Americas in order to nurture more dynamic media coverage, and to identify strategies to overcome the obstacles faced by journalists in reporting on the region. As an organization dedicated to deepening Canadians' awareness of hemispheric issues, FOCAL has identified the Canadian news media as a key potential ally, but, at the same time, has become increasingly concerned with its relative lack of in-depth coverage of the Americas. In conceiving and designing the event, FOCAL hoped to bridge the gap between the Canadian news media and the work of independent organizations focusing on regional issues. Steve Lee, Executive Director of CCFPD, also underlined the importance of the workshop in meeting his organization's mandate to help Canadians contribute to foreign policy development, a relationship that depends to a large degree on the news media as a source and distributor of information pertinent to policy-making.

This report is a synopsis of the key themes discussed during the workshop. Note that in this report, the term 'regional' refers to the western hemisphere (i.e. the countries of Latin American and the Caribbean). The key themes addressed at the meeting included:

- Coverage of the Americas in the Canadian media: Does it meet the demands and needs of Canadians? How has it evolved in recent years?

- The driving forces behind coverage of the Americas within the Canadian media: What types of stories are covered and why?

- What are the challenges to deepened and expanded coverage of the Americas, and what

has been the experience of Canadian journalists covering the region?

- Colombia: A case study of under coverage in the Canadian media?

- The Quebec City Summit of the Americas 2001: What will be the key stories for the Canadian media?

- How can coverage of the Americas be improved?

Some of the specific ideas were:

- Although Canada has become increasingly engaged politically, economically and culturally with the countries of the Americas, coverage of regional issues has been very limited, and is often no more than a superficial description of current events.

- Few regional stories that do not have a specific Canadian angle have been covered with any depth in the national media.

- When the spotlight does turn to a current event in the Americas, it often shines only for a short period, and fails to provide historical context or follow-up analysis to deepen public knowledge and understanding of the issue.

- The limited regional coverage has largely been the result of a perceived lack of interest among the Canadians in the countries of the Americas. Those Canadians that do have an interest in the region must become more vocal in their demands from media agencies for expanded coverage.

- Coverage has also been undermined by a lack of commitment to the region among decision-makers in the Canadian media, symbolized by the fact that only one English-speaking newspaper has a correspondent based in Latin America or the Caribbean.

- Broad generalizations about the coverage of regional issues in the Canadian media may not be accurate. In some cases, there has been growing identification among Canadians and the Canadian media with certain regional issues, for example NAFTA and relations with Mexico. Different parts of the country might also have different levels of regional coverage due to varying popular interests.

- In the shorter term, without a concerted effort on the part of journalists and editors to commit to regional coverage, and without a demonstrated appetite among Canadians for regional news, coverage of the Americas is not likely to deepen.

- If Canada does continue to engage with the countries of the Americas, and current demographic patters continue, a deepened regional coverage can be expected to follow over the long term.

The symposium agenda was divided into three main panels:

Panel 1 - Colombia: A case study of (under?) coverage.
Panel 2 - The Quebec City Summit of the Americas 2001: What's to cover?
Panel 3 - Latin America and the Caribbean as reflected in the Canadian media: How far have we come?

Colombia: A case study of (under?) coverage

In the opening presentation, Ricardo Ávila of *Cambio* (a Colombian news weekly) provided an overview of Colombia's internal conflict and its regional significance. As Ávila explained, Colombia faces a host of critical problems related to the war between the government and guerrilla forces supported by the drug trade. As a result of the political and social struggles, 35,000 people were killed in the past 10 years in Colombia and more than 3,000 were kidnapped last year alone. The rise in guerrilla membership is mirrored by the 81 per-cent increase in violent paramilitary members since 1992; a deadly cycle which has perpetuated the violence. Colombia's per capita income has now stagnated at 1994 levels and it faces mass emigration from the country.

Ávila pointed out that while escalating civil conflict in Colombia is attracting increasing international interest and concern, the complex relationships between drug trafficking, political violence, and the many actors involved in the social conflict in Colombia are often absent from foreign reporting and policy debate. For example, Ávila claims that few understand that there is no 'civil war' in Colombia, since the term insinuates a struggle between two groups in one country that have substantial popular support. Indeed, based on polling data, the vast majority of Colombians clearly support their government in this struggle, suggesting that it is not a civil war but a battle between government and rebel troops.

The National Post's Marina Jiménez agreed that Colombia deserves more attention in Canada, especially news coverage that goes beyond the stereotypical reporting of the country's drug and guerrilla-war problems. She noted that very little is known about Colombia's cultural sophistication and high education rate, or that it is the longest running democracy on the continent, and, despite all its internal turmoil, that it is the only country in the region never to have defaulted on its debt. Cristina Rojas, Professor of International Affairs at Carleton University, confirmed that stories and voices are silenced by one overwhelming stereotype: Colombia equals cocaine. Meanwhile, little is known of a growing women's movement, especially in the labour force, or that peace communities have been set up at the grassroots level

to develop conflict resolution strategies in the country. Dan Gardner of the Ottawa Citizen described journalists as storytellers in search of stories with a "dramatic arc" containing a rising action, climax, and resolution with clear-cut heroes and villains. Colombia's deep complexities defy this approach, however, and the lack of an easy narrative distracts journalists from the country.

The Canadian Angle

Kelly McParland, Foreign News Editor at the National Post, added that violence in Colombia is nothing new. He underlined that reporters have to find a new angle and that the story has to connect with Canadians in order to be sold to editors. With the obvious exception of the United States, few countries in the Americas are of intrinsic interest to Canadian editors and producers. The one exception could be Mexico due to its participation in NAFTA and its proximity to Canada.

Jiménez concurred that the only stories that do get covered are ones with a strong Canadian angle, which is regrettable because the Canadian angle often blots out the complex realities facing the countries in question. An example was the recent kidnapping of Canadian Norbert Reinhart by FARC guerrillas, as news stories focused on Reinhart and largely ignored Colombian politics. Foreign-based journalists also suffer from the obsession with a Canadian angle, as they are often out of touch with their target audience and unable to succeed in pitching regional stories.

Another concern expressed related to the problem of journalists who often do little more than follow the government's agenda in their coverage. For example, Plan Colombia got little attention in the media until US President Bill Clinton flew to Cartagena. Immediately, the papers followed the story for a week before dropping it. Furthermore, whenever Colombia merits coverage, journalists disregard context and the history surrounding the event. "We only care about the last 24 hours," Gardner said, "the media do history terribly." A further complication has been the increasing costs of living in the countries of the hemisphere, which has decreased the number of stringers or correspondents based in the region.

Participants agreed that the quantity and quality of the United States' coverage of the Americas far surpasses Canadian coverage. The reasons go beyond proximity, and are largely based on simple demographics. Whereas 12 per cent of the United States' population is of Hispanic origin, in Canada fewer than 300,000 people are of Hispanic origin, making up only one per cent of Canada's population. Simply, Canada lacks cultural, linguistic, geographical and social ties with the Americas, and some even questioned whether Canada considered itself part of the hemisphere.

Is there an appetite for regional news?

Paul Knox of the Globe and Mail reacted to the criticism of Canadian coverage of the Americas by asking for a show of hands in the audience of those who had ever written a letter to the media requesting more coverage of the Americas. When very few hands were raised, he suggested that there is a simple lack of demonstrated appetite for regional coverage. If a group such as the symposium's audience—with a vested interest in the Americas—has not voiced its interest to editors and producers, it is difficult to expect the media to make the region a priority.

Knox also challenged participants not to generalize about 'the media' as a whole. "We have to be really rigorous about defining what it is we expect from the different segments of this monster that we call the media." In this way, Knox underlined the importance of directing criticism and comments at specific newspapers and television stations instead of 'the media' in general, and not to bundle every newspaper and television station into one category. Each news organization is a separate entity in and of itself, with interests and goals different from all other news gathering organizations. As such, if we are to reach an understanding between what the audience and the media organizations expect from each other, a dialogue must be formed between a specific newspaper or television station and its audience on a one-to-one basis. Knox also suggested that those serious about the Americas are able to find extensive information on the internet with relative ease.

The Quebec City Summit of the Americas 2001: What's to cover?

Paul Knox introduced three important themes in covering the Quebec City Summit: 1) An assessment of the proposed Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) within the context of Canada's current relations with the US and Mexico; 2) A discussion of the fragile state of democracy in the Americas, as well as recent political and economic reforms in the region; and 3) The role of the small Caribbean nations in pushing for trade to be the focus of previous summits. Ironically, the Caribbean is "one of the great black holes for Canadian journalism" despite the fact that Canada has strong ties to a number of countries through the Commonwealth. In covering the Summit, Knox challenged journalists to integrate the coverage of political and economic affairs, instead of separating the two topics and relegating economic news to the business section.

Jean-Michel Leprince of Radio-Canada suggested that summits themselves are of little interest to journalists. In general, journalists are frustrated with the focus on grandstanding during such events and, because of security reasons, the pool systems imposed on reporters that produce the same stories, quotes, and pictures. As a result, the colourful sideshows often become the main topic of interest. The sideshow in Quebec will be the protests—which may overshadow everything else, including coverage of the Americas—mostly because dramatic visuals are irresistible. What will get interest and excitement are "protesters in funny costumes trying to

smash barriers and tear gas" instead of a stuffy sit-down conference.

Nevertheless, Leprince suggested that the Quebec City Summit might be different due to a political will for the FTAA that could lead to concrete action on the part of hemispheric leaders. Leprince stressed the critical responsibility of journalists to assess free trade and its expected social impact, and noted the opportunity presented by the Summit to expose such matters. The time leading up to the Summit will also allow for analysis of current regional issues, and Radio-Canada will be sending reporters to Argentina for the Trade Minister's meeting preceding the Summit. As well, Radio-Canada will do a piece on the upcoming elections in Peru, and the effects of five years of NAFTA on Mexico. Generally, Leprince was more optimistic about foreign coverage in the francophone media than his English-speaking counterparts. While he felt the Quebec media had generally done a poor job of foreign coverage in the past, foreign coverage is increasingly featured in newspapers and higher up in the broadcast line-up, and there are more resources dedicated to foreign coverage. He hoped the Summit would allow for a forum to address key regional issues in a comprehensive fashion.

Latin America and the Caribbean as reflected in the Canadian media: How far have we come?

CBC Radio Producer Bob Carty claimed that Canadian coverage of the Americas is weak and is only moving backwards. Out of a sample group of 1400 recent international stories aired by the CBC, only 60 individual stories dealing with 8 distinct news items were about Latin America.

Carty suggested three reasons for the poor coverage. First, Canadian journalism is caught in a vicious cycle whereby editors demand that journalists present evidence of public interest while pitching a story about Latin America, and yet, without these stories, public interest cannot be generated. The lack of coverage is also a response to the end of the Cold War. As much as it distorted perceptions of Latin America, the Cold War made it easier for journalists to explain to their readers why Latin American issues were relevant. During the 1980s, countries like Nicaragua fit into the dramatic arc. Finally, Carty described a 'spotlight effect' that is the excessive concentration on one or two stories to the exclusion of others; "it is the epitome of pack journalism" he noted, and it distorts reality by leaving everything else in the dark. The danger with this type of coverage is that the world may not see the warning signs of tragedies such as the Rwandan genocide. As well, "the spotlight has no memory. Every time it is turned on it's like a new light shining on things. No context. No history." Perhaps the greatest concern is that the spotlight is removed before the recovery from a crisis begins, and when the issues of lasting importance are taking shape.

Joanne McPherson, Senior Producer with CBC Television's 'Foreign Assignment', remarked that the CBC's coverage of Latin America in the last five years has focused only on natural disasters and trade missions. The last mention of paramilitary activity or of humanitarian

conditions in Colombia was in 1998. As to why this has been the case, she noted the absence of correspondents south of the United States: "We're just not there. Unless there are bureaus and reporters based in these regions, we're not going to have the coverage in our newscasts." She suggested it was time to re-evaluate where organizations like the CBC place their bureaus. She pointed out that CTV is planning to open up to six new bureaus, one of which may be located in Mexico. Participants agreed that this would be welcome news for proponents of Latin American coverage, since competition will entice other news organizations to consider following suit.

What determines foreign coverage?

Kelly McParland, Foreign News Editor at the National Post, challenged the audience to define what is meant by 'good coverage'. He suggested that good foreign coverage might simply follow trade, the economy, or population movement, and that if this is the criteria, Canadian coverage should clearly focus on the United States. Further, McParland suggested that editors "go where the loudest noise is", and the loudest noise has not been in Latin America for some time. It was also suggested that the media cannot and should not generate interest on its own since it is in the business of selling news - society has to develop an interest first.

Stewart Muir, National Editor of the Vancouver Sun, stressed that editors need to believe that their efforts are gaining readers. They tend to look for things that are visually interesting because the audience is more visually oriented. Also important is the narrative structure and the reporter's ability to enhance reader engagement. For example, Brazilians dressed in Mountie uniforms protesting Canada's beef ban entices readers to read on and engage in the dry facts of the story. Newspapers also search for timeliness and exclusivity in order to enhance the paper's self-importance and professional status. As well, geographic proximity and regional interests plays a role; people need to have an affinity with a region in order to seek news about that region. Particularly on Canada's West coast, where Asia runs far deeper in citizens' consciousness, raising a Canadian affinity for the Americas as a region may be difficult.

Evan Dyer, Reporter for CBC Radio, agreed with the assessment of a continuous decline in foreign coverage since the 1970s. Now, in a time of ebbing foreign coverage, he explained, geography must count for something, and coverage of Canada's own hemisphere should increase. Still, the problem remains that Canadians are the only people in the hemisphere that don't consider themselves to be 'Americans'. Dyer compared Canada to a bungalow separated from its Latin American neighbours by the United States high-rise, and felt the United States served as a barrier to information about the Americas.

Conclusions: Challenges to Improved Regional Coverage

The general sentiment among panelists and members of the audience was that Latin American and Caribbean countries, and hemispheric issues in general, have not been a priority for the

Canadian media. Much of the discussion revolved around a perceived vicious circle plaguing regional media coverage: Without sufficient popular interest in the Americas there will be no expansion of coverage, but without in-depth news coverage, popular interest in the Americas will not develop.

Some participants suggested that the media carries the responsibility of informing the public and stimulating debate on a broad range of issues, and that this is a critical role in all democratic societies. It was generally felt that increased coverage of the Americas required leadership on the part of news media 'gate-keepers' (i.e. editors and producers); leadership that would take the form of decisions to assign journalists to cover the region. Many also stressed the need for commitment on the part of news outlets, for example, by opening a bureau or starting a section in the newspaper devoted to Latin America. Until there is a commitment to Latin America, coverage will continue to be inconsistent, and interest in the region among the general public will likely remain minimal.

At the same time, however, in order for editors to make the decision to commit funds and human resources to Latin America, Canadians need to demonstrate a clear appetite for Latin American news by engaging with specific news outlets and demanding expanded coverage. It was stressed during the meeting that news editors do listen to public pressure, and the best way to promote coverage is to manifest a genuine desire for it. If an appetite for news is demonstrated and editors believe increased coverage will bring new readers, deepened coverage can be expected.

Another strategy to increase regional coverage could involve training and awareness building programs on regional issues for journalists. Possible options include programs to immerse journalists in the region, as well as institutional linkages between Canadian and Latin American news agencies. If journalists have access to, and understanding of, regional news, they may pressure their editors to expand coverage. Those with an interest in the Americas were encouraged to establish deepened ties with individual reporters covering foreign affairs. Given the influence that well-established journalists often have with their editors in pitching stories, groups may increase the likelihood of expanded coverage by providing background information and contacts directly to journalists.

Perhaps the greatest challenge facing those who demand an increase in regional coverage is to prove to Canadians that the countries of Latin American and the Caribbean are newsworthy. Participants were largely in agreement that Canadians have a limited appetite for foreign news, and thus Latin America and the Caribbean must compete with other parts of the world for attention from the general public. Canadians, and news media 'gatekeepers' in particular, will have to be convinced of the importance of regional issues for Canada before a change in attitude occurs. This responsibility falls on the shoulders of all public organizations working on hemispheric issues in Canada.

For organizations such as FOCAL, the event was an occasion to consider formulating new projects to address the gap between expectations and realities regarding hemispheric coverage. One clear conclusion taken from the event was the critical role of non-governmental organizations and policy institutions in supporting the media in its mandate to inform Canadians. The hope is that the workshop will help to develop strengthened ties between the news media and independent organizations, resulting in an improved quality of information on international issues in Canada.

While generally critical of news coverage of the Americas, the discussions also offered some reasons for optimism. Mexico was cited as an example of a country that has entered into the Canadian consciousness, both among the news media and the general public. This offers hope that political and economic ties may eventually lead to an expanded awareness of Canadians vis-à-vis their hemisphere in general. A number of recent reports on regional issues were also cited as proof of the quality reporting which has occasionally appeared in the Canadian media, but the need for a sustained commitment to regional news was underlined. As Canadian society changes and demographic patterns result in an increasing Latin American presence in Canada, news coverage of the hemisphere will likely change. Whether this occurs at the pace hoped for by those interested in the region is another matter, and may largely depend on their own effectiveness in engaging Canadians.

List of Participants

Ricardo Avila
Deputy Editor-in-Chief, *Cambio*

Chris Dornan
Director, Carleton University School of Journalism and Communication

Dan Gardner
Senior Writer, Ottawa Citizen

Martina Jimenez
Foreign Affairs Reporter, National Post

Jean-Michel Leprince
Journalist, *Radio-Canada*

Joanne McPherson
Senior Producer, CBC TV 'Foreign Assignment'

Alberto Rabilotta
Foreign Correspondent, *Notimex*

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Bob Carty
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